

Tacky Games

Mathias Fuchs

Leuphana University Lüneburg
Wolffring 39
12101 Berlin
mathias.fuchs@leuphana.de

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INTRODUCTION

In design and the arts, there has been a long-lasting theoretical debate about the phenomenon of kitsch and tackiness. (Greenberg 1939; Broch 1955; Loos 1910; Dorfles 1968; Mihăilescu 1997, among others) – without, however, having reached a consensus about what kitsch is and how it should be evaluated in relation to high art, historical settings, or cultural diversity.

But what counts as kitsch and tackiness in digital games? Classical kitsch theories taken from fine art and architecture do not help us a lot. Most games easily meet several of the proposed kitsch-features of “transfer from one medium to the other” (Dorfles 1968: 87), reproducibility (Benjamin 2008 [1936]: 236), “perverted style” (McBride 2005), “elevation of the mundane ... to the level of the eternal” (Broch 1955: 169), low price of the product (Greenberg 1939), or disposability for mass consumption (Weldon 2018). Quite often game content is “charged with stock emotions [that] spontaneously trigger an unreflective emotional response.” (Kulka 1996, cited in Ortlieb and Carbon 2019: 3)

Are all games kitsch then? Hardly, because there is a broad agreement that games can be art (furtherfield 2010; Flanagan 2009), that there are masterpieces of the genre, and that they serve aspirations beyond entertainment or commercial undertakings.

We therefore have to look for indicators of “tackiness” that are specific for digital games. Ian Bogost (2011: 84) argues that games driven by “trite sentimentalism” and “borrowed conventions” exemplify kitsch. His argument accuses games based on “tropes of nostalgia and idealism” as poor products that lack cultivation. Bogost does unfortunately not tell us, whether acclaimed cult games like *Red Dead Redemption* or *Assassin’s Creed* avoid appropriation and simplified representation of emotions. He concedes that the games he analyses are an “easy target”.

To develop a deeper understanding about kitsch games it seems appropriate to start with a differentiation of kitsch, camp and tackiness. To explore this, we

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conducted an initial study with two groups of game studies students in two European capital cities. Which games did they perceive as tacky, kitsch or camp? The groups consisted of male and female students from 14 different national or family backgrounds and ranged from 19 years to 42 years of age. The survey started with a phenomenological assessment that was recorded via *Survey Monkey*. The evaluation of the data revealed substantial variation in the appreciation of games considered tacky or kitschy. We found out that experienced gamers were less likely to classify games as kitsch than beginners. Also, “cultural distance” correlated with fewer negative judgements. These results support the hypothesis that kitsch and tackiness are properties attributed to players rather than inherent to games.

The second phase consisted of an intensive reading of the classical texts about kitsch mentioned above. We tried to find out whether the criteria proposed by the scholars were conducive to kitsch analysis of digital games. There was no obvious correlation between the degree of perceived kitschiness with the properties outlined by Dorfles (1969), Greenberg (1939), and Takahashi (2004), i.e. “transfer” – in other words transmedia appropriation, low price and “ubiquitous availability”, and “otherness and weirdness”. Also, “perverted style” (McBride 2005) was not consistently associated with kitsch. A considerably higher degree of correlation was detected when students observed formulaic movements and gestures with stable meanings. These formulas have been accused of standing in the way of a singular aesthetic experience, and if they were not caused by technical limitations or conscious irony, felt tacky. There was a high degree of approval for a specific kitsch indicator that has been developed for works of fine arts and design. This criterion worked for detecting tackiness in games: Kulka’s definition of kitsch art as “charged with stock emotions [that] spontaneously trigger an unreflective emotional response” (1997: 26) had a high correlation with games considered tacky.

Robert Musil’s reflections on kitsch in silent movies, “where anger becomes rolling of the eyes, virtue is beauty, and the entire soul is a paved avenue of familiar allegories” (Musil 1990, written in 1947), also apply well to digital games. Musil’s “familiar allegories” challenge what Elina Roinotti calls „originality and authenticity“. In games, it seems, “pretense and fake value” (Roinotti 2023: 2) are not a result of mediatic transfer or ubiquitous availability. The tackiness rather results from stock emotions and familiar allegories. This at least is what our student groups found out. Further research will have to consolidate the hypothesis with larger samples and with a wider range of examined games.

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